

Quaffing Cupfuls of the Cure

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From my bed I could see the cold, bleak Saturday peek through the blinds. Something tickled the insides of my throat, some internal feather duster trying to stir up debris, and a fit of coughs racked my small body. My young immune system seemed to be especially susceptible to all the sticky hands and runny noses inherent in the second-grade classroom. My nose was perpetually stuffed up, bouts of coughing were frequent, and soreness permanently resided in my throat. Mornings were when all the ailments would come together in one cacophonous choir and swoop in to take my health hostage.

Only my mom knew a way to beat them off, and that day it was the scent of this cure that managed to waft through the obstructions of my nasal passage and convince me that waking up was a worthwhile venture.

Running downstairs, I swung around the banister and into the hallway. My sock-bedecked feet helped me slide from hardwood to linoleum, into the kitchen. I stood in the warmth and waited. My mom turned away from the stove when she heard my skittering step. Then the ritualized question was put forth.

“Would you like some chai?”

I grinned, knowing she knew that the answer to that question would always be yes.

I dragged a stool over to the stove, as I wanted a first row seat to the potion’s creation. Milk rested in the pot, waiting for the energy to begin its frothing performance. Cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, ginger: all went into the pot to mingle with milk. Both waiting for the show to begin, we heard a hiss as the milk began to boil, its foamy appendages rising and reaching to meet the lip of the pot. Just before it escaped, my mom turned off the heat, and the dairy-derived beast settled down. Loose tea leaves were thrown into the mix and the colors swirled and eddied, pushed forward by the heat. When an even tint had reached all the edges of the pot, the cure was poured into a cup for each of us.

I took a tentative sip, and the warm taste of spices and milk and sugar soothed the ragged edges of my throat. Tendrils of steam caressed the air and opened up my airways. Coughing subsided, and I thanked my wizard of a mother for healing me. I was determined to learn her magical ways of chai-making, and eventually, I did.

Years later, chai would help me with a different affliction: stress. During the wee hours, when a paper was due the next day or a test was looming in the near future, I’d turn to tea for comfort. Taking my stool over to the stove, I’d sit with my homework, my book, or my calculator, and keep an eye on that impish milk that had the habit of rising out of the pot and onto the stovetop, sometimes even dousing the pilot light. The rhythm of creation always worked to calm me. It

reminded me that it was all right to breathe every once in a while, to inhale the scent of familiar spices and watch steam writhe in midair. With my liquid courage, I was able to bypass most mental turmoil. Papers would be finished; nerves, calmed. My magical friend had done it again.

These days, I don't make chai as often as I used to. There's no fresh ginger, and the kitchenette is always cluttered with someone else's cooking. When I do get the chance to make tea, it's a happy occasion. Joined in my venture by a friend or two, we'll make the trek down to the kitchenette. There aren't any stools here, but we'll drag a few chairs to the stove, throw our ingredients into the pot, and begin our vigil. A contemplative companionship is present during the process, spawning conversations that wouldn't happen elsewhere.

During one of these chai sessions, a friend turns to me and asks, "How is your soul?"

Only around chai would she dare talk about such things as souls.

I reflect for a moment.

"My soul is well."

Content with my answer, my friend resumes the watch, waiting once again for milk to perform and steam to spiral and healing to be delivered to body, mind, and soul.